

60th Anniversary of the Las Vegas Flash Flood of June 13, 1955



Flooded streets in Las Vegas on June 13, 1955. Photo Credit: UNLV Library Collections.

Hundreds of flash floods have impacted the Las Vegas Valley over the years. However, the historical significance of flash floods over time can easily fade. Newer residents of the Las Vegas Valley may be familiar with the significant flash floods of September 11, 2012 or July 8, 1999. Both of these flash floods, while historic in their time, had their magnitude mitigated by flood control in the Las Vegas Valley. There was a time in the Las Vegas Valley when flood control did not exist and one event in particular sparked the need for the Las Vegas valley to do something about flash flooding. This spark was the flash flood of June 13, 1955.

Here are some highlights of the June 13, 1955 flash flood:

- First flash flood to cause over a million dollars in damage ever in the Las Vegas Valley.
- Damages totaled \$2.7 million in 1955 dollars. Adjusted for inflation this would be about \$23.8 million in 2015 dollars.
- Heavy rain fell over the Spring Mountains and swept down natural washes into the Las Vegas Valley. Only 0.39 inch of rain along with hail

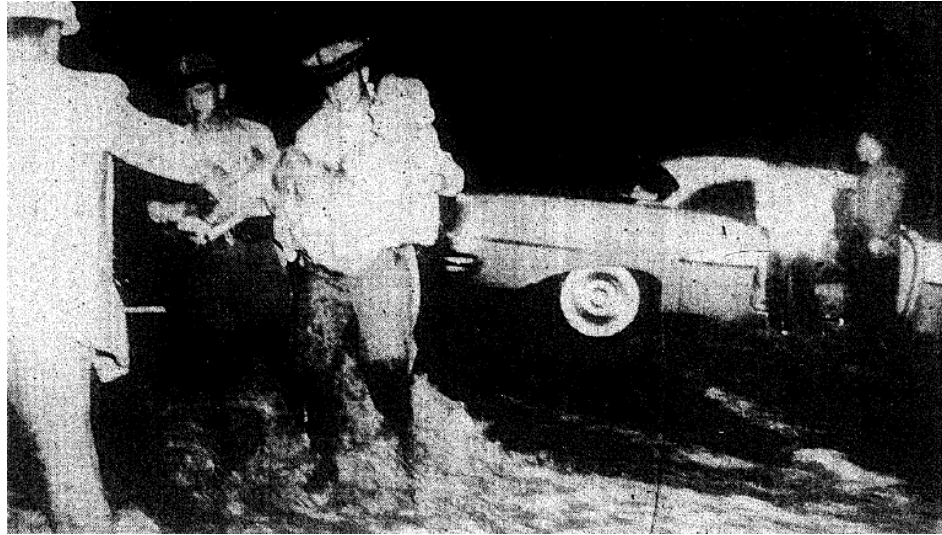
fell that day at McCarran Airport at the National Weather Service weather station.

- Floodwaters picked up lumber and debris as they moved through the city.
- Water was reported to be up to 4 feet deep.
- Significant flooding on Fremont Street with "feet" of water flowing down it.
- One runway was covered with rocks and mud at McCarran Airport.
- The Charleston Avenue Underpass flooded.
- Nearly 70 percent of phone service was lost as phone poles and thus phone lines were knocked down by floodwaters. Phone service altogether was cut off to Henderson for several hours.

Shocked by the magnitude of the flooding and the number of residents that experienced damage, this event highlighted several issues:

- Few business or homeowners had flood insurance.
- Many did not care to pay for flood insurance in a "desert area".
- No organized flood control existed in Las Vegas.

Following this event, local leaders met to discuss the need for flood control in the valley. Although several more major floods would take place, the Clark County Regional Flood Control District was ultimately formed with the goal of overseeing flood safety in the Las Vegas Valley. In addition, there was no direct weather radar coverage in southern Nevada until the 1970s. Even satellite and weather observations were very limited with no dense network of organized weather stations existing within the Las Vegas Valley. Forecasters in the 1950s relied heavily on whatever they could see out their windows and got from reports from the public or local officials. Today, the area is served by a radar operated by the National Weather Service located at Nelson Peak that assists forecasters in monitoring shower and thunderstorm activity and provides a more timely way to alert of threatening weather. In addition, the National Weather Service and Clark County Regional Flood Control District have an extensive amount of data available to track the weather via satellite, computer models and current weather observations from dozens of automated weather stations around the Las Vegas Valley.



Photos from the Las Vegas Review-Journal of rescues taking place during the June 13, 1955 flood. The bottom photo was taken at the Charleston Underpass.

Take Steps To Avert More Floods

Southern Nevada moved on four fronts today to sweep away storm damage and to bolster itself against possible recurrence of Monday's devastating flood.

A meeting is set today among city officers, Bureau of Reclamation engineers and Federal Civil Defense Administration leaders to assay a half-million dollars in public damage and to chart repairs. And machinery was set up this morning to process appeals from homeowners for aid from the Small Business Administration.

The Review-Journal learned that U. S. Corps of Engineers experts are here to discuss possible flood control measures which would protect Las Vegas against flash flood storms.

Sen. Alan Bible and Rep. Cliff Young stood by in Washington with assurances that appeals for federal aid funds would be pushed through Congress with minimum delay.

City Manager A. H. Kennedy, faced with an estimated cost of \$400,000 to city property, warned that the lessons learned when rain and hail turned streets into boiling torrents will force an even tougher city policy on street paving and subdivision development.

On the third day after the storm, Kennedy said reinforced city crews have been able to clear

News article that appeared in the Las Vegas Review-Journal in the days after the June 13, 1955 flood talking about the need for flood control in Las Vegas.

SUPPLEMENTAL PRECIPITATION DATA

STORM OF JUNE 13, 1955

COUNTY	LATITUDE	LONGITUDE	LOCATION	TYPE OF GAGE	ACCURACY	STORM TOTAL	REMARKS
Clark	36° 15'	115° 02'	Nellis Air Force Base	8" Standard on top of small building	Excellent	.23	Gage read every 6 hours. Rain began 2:57 p.m. and ended 3:48 p.m., reading taken at 3:18 p.m., .18; rain began 5:44 p.m. and ended 8:02 p.m., reading taken at 11:18 p.m., .05. Small hail occurred 3:32 to 3:34 p.m.
Clark	36° 09'	115° 11'	D. Hahn, residence 1140 Melville Rd.	8" Standard	Excellent	.93	Weather Bureau employee private residence. Gage checked prior to and following storm.
Clark	36° 11'	115° 11'	C. A. Carpenter, Twin Lakes Subdivision	Several containers in yard	Good	-	Rainfall varied from 2.8 to 3.4 inches. Heavy rainfall occurred between 5:10 and 5:45 p.m.
Clark	36° 11'	115° 11'	Mr. Stringer's residence, Twin Lakes Subdivision	Drinking Glass	Fair	-	Placed drinking glass in the yard about 5 minutes after heavy rainfall started. Rainfall converted to 1.7 inches. Estimated total rainfall 2.0 inches.
Clark	36° 08'	115° 13'	Residence at inter- section of Lindell and Eldorado Streets	Little red wagon, level exposure	Fair	-	Wagon had vertical sides and measured 3 inches in depth. Rainfall was estimated at 3.0 inches. Considerable thunder, lightning, and hail also occurred at this location.
Clark	36° 10'	115° 14'	Trash disposal area on West Charleston Ave.	Enameled sauce pan	Fair	-	Depth of water in vertical sided sauce pan was .50 inch. Estimated evaporation was 1.00 inch. Total estimated rainfall, 1.50 inches. Location visited at 11:30 a.m. on June 16.
Clark	36° 11'	115° 13'	Trash disposal area at SE corner section 24, Township 20 S, Range 60 E	Soup can	Fair	-	Soup can contained 2.4 inches of water with a well defined mark at 3.3 inches. Estimated rainfall 3.3 inches. Location visited 2:00 p.m. on June 16.

Supplemental rain totals from around the Las Vegas Valley published in
Climatological Data – Nevada.